

[By Wilson Ring](#)

U.S. Rep. Peter Welch heard stories at the University of Vermont on Monday from first-generation college students working to build a better life than their parents, a single mother studying full time, and others seeking education while accumulating student debt without knowing how they will repay the loans that are putting them through college.

Welch, a Democrat, is seeking the stories so he can take them back to Congress and let the students humanize the debate over whether to reduce the interest rate on some federally subsidized student loans. Allowing the rate to increase could potentially add thousands of dollars to the debt the students he met Monday will have to repay.

Ann Nguyen, 20, a junior political science major from Keene, N.H., a child of Vietnamese immigrants, told Welch she expects to be the first person in her family to graduate from college. She said she had about \$30,000 in private debt. She said she didn't know how much she owes for public loans, but she could end up owing \$100,000.

"Right now it's just really hard," Nguyen said.

"It is scary. I mean it's astonishing because that's an anchor. It's a financial albatross when you graduate," Welch said to Nguyen in the Dudley Davis student center at UVM. "It really has gotten a lot worse."

In recent weeks Welch has focused on the July 1 rise in the interest rate charged on federal Direct Stafford Student Loans from 3.4 percent to 6.8 percent, which could add thousands of dollars to each student's debt. The U.S. House has since passed a bill that would keep the interest rate at the lower rate, but Democrats don't like the mechanism Republicans would use to pay for it, estimated by the GOP to be \$6 billion, while Democrats estimate the cost would be \$4 billion.

While Democrats object to the funding mechanism chosen by the Republican-controlled House -- cuts to a federal health care program -- Welch said his party's plan for paying for it -- cuts to oil and gas subsidies -- is equally objectionable to the other party.

"I'm very happy we went from adamant opposition in the majority to support, but now we're having the usual dysfunctional fight about how to pay for it," he said.

"What we should be doing is working together on a pay-for that would actually help bring down tuition costs. That's what I think we should be doing. You know, we've got to work together on this, the goal has to not be a political win, it has to be a more affordable college education," Welch said.

Some of the stories Welch is collecting about students, or parents, trying to pay for college, are listed on his website.

For the students who spoke with Welch on Monday, the debate in Congress is secondary to the debts they are amassing while getting their degrees.

Leahn Bass, a 25-year-old junior from Burlington who is studying social work, estimated the higher interest cost could increase her student debt by thousands of dollars.

"I'm a single parent working full time and going to school full time, and that's a little bit more than what I want," Bass said.